Medieval Biographical Collections in Comparison

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This volume offers a comparative approach to collections of biographical texts from the Buddhist, Christian and Islamic worlds in the period 400-1600. It examines how both common and diverse compilation and literary strategies could be employed within and across different regions and religions. Throughout history, remarkable men and women stood out in a way that triggered an often-complex process of retelling their lives and preserving their memory through written narratives, and as a result they could become examples and sources of inspiration and identification for communities. This special issue looks at instances where such stories were preserved and presented within wider collections of biographies, where they could acquire new meanings and significance within an overarching narrative. The volume combines specialist case-studies on specific biographical collections from different regions with a number of co-written comparative essays that draw on and expand upon the conclusions of the individual studies. Within this comparative framework, the writing and compilation strategies of medieval compilers and the reception and audience of biographical collections are discussed at length. The particular potential of biographical collections to allow compilers across different cultures to evoke and promote particular ›visions of community‹ is teased out throughout the special issue.

Keywords: transcultural comparison, biography, compilation, authorship, seriality, reception, manuscript transmission, community, identity

Medieval communities that perceived themselves as a coherent whole often identified in their past remarkable individuals, for whose lives they carried out a complex, often long, process of retelling on behalf of both contemporaries and future generations. How and what societies chose to remember are, as a matter of fact, crucial for understanding what brings and keeps communities together. As Jan Assmann observed, cultural memory »fixed fateful events of the past and was maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance)«.[1] Cultural memory is thus fixed »in immovable figures of memory and stores of knowledge«, but, at the same time, is a never-ending reconstruction. The lives of extraordinary individuals constituted knowledge defined and preserved through cultural memory. Learnedness, valour in battle, a peculiar

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1   Assmann, Collective Memory, 129.

lifestyle, holiness and piety are but a few of the domains in which a person – both historical and fictional – could become a source of inspiration and set a normative ideal for the communities exposed to the retelling of his or her life. When a specific category of individuals is identified by a community as remarkable or meaningful, the possibility arises of bringing life stories together to celebrate and commemorate a politically or religiously defined group whose representation had acquired an essential ideological or socio-cultural function. This volume focuses on one way these stories were preserved and presented, that is, as collections of biographies, which when compiled together became part of a larger textual whole with new meanings and significance, and sometimes subsumed within overarching narratives. In other words, a medieval biographical collection is a group of biographical tracts brought together in the period 400-1600 CE by one or more compilers, who either used previously written texts, wrote them anew or a combination of both. This encompasses collections of multiple stand-alone texts, single texts containing multiple biographies, or more complex works containing biographies alongside or intermeshed within, for example, chronographical and genealogical texts.

The serial form has always been a popular storytelling mode, and a powerful one, as present-day media eloquently demonstrates. However, serial biographies are not an invention of the modern, industrial world in which repetition and reproduction feature so prominently.[2] In fact, the majority of the biographies that survive from ancient times were parts of a series or were transmitted as such. The major biographers from the Greek and Roman world – Cornelius Nepos, Plutarch and Suetonius – juxtaposed lives to encourage comparative readings and provide a way for readers to reflect on their own lives and societies as they read about outstanding individuals from the past.[3] Far from the ancient Mediterranean world, Sima Qian (c. 145-87 BCE), the first grand Chinese historian, also chose to collect in his *Records* the biographies of the most remarkable individuals who lived from the Xia dynasty (c. 2700-1600 BCE) up to his own time.[4] Biographies of remarkable religious individuals were presented in collections from the earliest centuries of the three medieval cultures that constitute the areas of research of this volume: written in the 4th century, Jerome's *De viris illustribus* soon became a model for later works in the Christian world;[5] in 6th-century China, where Buddhism had just taken root, Baochang and Huijiao compiled the oldest extant collections of Buddhist nuns' and monks' biographies;[6] *ṭabaqāt* (generations/classes of individuals) works already started to be written in early Islamic historiography in the 2nd/8th century, with collections initially focused on scholars and poets.[7]

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2   Eco, Innovation & Repetition.

3   Beneker, Individual and Collected Lives in Antiquity.

4   Brown, The Chinese Sense; Jialin, Inception.

5   See the contribution of Ward and Wieser to this volume.

6   Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China,* 10-11.

7   Makdisi, Ṭabaqāt-biography.

The biographical collections examined in this volume emerge from varied origins within the medieval Buddhist, Christian and Islamic worlds, which in turn engenders a broad diversity in terms of their purposes, audiences and uses.[8] Consequently, the collections may be classified under various terminologies within these traditions, such as hagiographies or *ṭabaqāt*. But the focus of this volume is not to compare the biographical collections on this level. That is, the intention is not to stress the context of their previously determined historiographic genre. Such types of collections – such as Buddhist genealogies, Islamic biographical dictionaries and Christian *Gesta episcoporum* – rely on theoretical frameworks, genre definitions and vocabularies that are the products of centuries-long research within separate academic traditions. This is not to say that research on these separate traditions have not influenced each other.[9] Nonetheless, the comparative emphasis of this volume lies on closer examination of how the processes of writing, organising and ultimately receiving these collections of individual biographies channelled a greater sense of identity for the community in which they were created. This analysis shows that the collections could provide a sense of belonging to the communities, which in turn integrated them into their own social, cultural, political, religious and liturgical traditions. Thus, these narratives offered specific visions of community that highlight the connections between the past and the present and conveyed a sense of history for its members. Biographical collections constructed as lineage histories were often chosen in Buddhist Tibet to assert the identity and authenticity of a specific school or religious tradition, as this typology of texts outlined the series of its authorities.[10] The *Gesta episcoporum* and the *Gesta abbatum* celebrated churches and monasteries conceived as institutions whose history took the form of an unbroken series of Lives, one following the other.[11] The need to certify the reliable transmission of *ḥadīth*, reinforced by interest already shown for genealogy, poetry and the early followers of Muhammad, appears to be among the driving forces behind the success of *ṭabaqāt*-literature as a historical genre in classical Islam.[12] The juxtaposition of life stories to build larger narratives is thus a longstanding textual strategy shared by Buddhist, Christian and Islamic literary cultures, despite the absence of an *Urtext* or a discernible shared tradition.

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8   The interest and pertinence of comparing biographies from different religious cultures has been recently demonstrated by Conermann *et al.* (eds.), *Narrative Pattern and Genre*; for a comparative approach to Latin, Byzantine and Buddhist collected biographies, see Palmer, The Global Eminent Life.

9   For instance, the current methodology and categories for studying hagiography and its features (e.g., formulaic nature, *topoi*, role of topography, edifying purpose, performative practices etc.) originally emerged as a product of European modern history and more particularly, the Catholic Reformation. However, these approaches have influenced the theoretical and hermeneutic frameworks applied to the analysis of biographical texts in both Buddhist and Islamic studies. See the introductory remarks on the assimilation of Buddhist genres to hagiographic literature by Kleine, Portraits of Pious Women, as well as Gilks, Hagiography (Buddhism). For the comparison of hagiographic themes and literature from the Christian and Islamic worlds, see Renard, *Islam and Christianity*, 193-198.

10 Roesler, Operas, 123-127.

11 Sot, *Gesta episcoporum.*

12 Cooperson, Biographical Literature; Hafsi, Recherches; Khalidi, Islamic Biographical Dictionaries; al-Qāḍī, Biographical Dictionaries.

Although these biographical collections were composed within distinct historiographical traditions, they share notable similarities. For example, these include the ways in which the biographies were brought together and organised in comprehensive, coherent and carefully laid out works, as well as how they were circulated and often updated to respond to similar literary strategies and textual practices. Moreover, these collections actively participated in processes of community-building and social consolidation. They cemented the identity of the groups and nourished a sense of belonging often through defining the communities by both opposition (*us* vs *others/them*) and assimilation (present communities mirrored by and seeing their reflection in past communities). These textual and socio-anthropological features are not restricted to a single religious culture and therefore make comparative research possible. The biographical collections written within the three medieval cultures and the texts compared in this volume do not present the same structure, width and richness of detail in the life stories they incapsulate: the vignettes in the *Singular Volume of the Rlangs*, Jerome's bio-bibliographies and al-Khazraji's obituaries select and squeeze biographical information into short dense texts, while the compilers of the *Libellus de situ civitatis Mediolani* and *De episcopis Salisburgensibus* relied particularly on the articulate and broad narrative of the bishops' Lives comprised in their collections. Despite differences in length and content across the texts, medieval authors and compilers built on individual life stories to shape the history of a community across time and space: the collection became something more than the sum of its parts. Thus, the research object of this volume is situated at the intersection between the biographical material presented via separate sections dedicated to explicitly identified individuals and the wider, coherent and meaningful narratives constructed through and upon them. While the analysed collections were written at different times – from the 4th to the 15th century – and vary greatly in scale and dissemination, they are not meant to be representative of their respective genres and historical regions. Rather, they were chosen to provide an entry point to discuss literary strategies and socio-political contexts in a cross-cultural comparison. In fact, this comparative endeavour was devised and pursued under the umbrella of a large collaborative and interdisciplinary project which sparked the questions that kick-started the research in this volume: how and why did authors and compilers from Buddhist Tibet, Christian Europe and Islamic South Arabia shape their visions of communities through collections juxtaposing life stories?

The Comparative Process
The biographical collections discussed in this volume come from the three religious cultures that provided the fields of research for the FWF Special Research Programme (SFB) *Visions of Community* (VISCOM) conducted by the University of Vienna and the Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW). VISCOM brought together researchers from historical and social anthropological backgrounds working on the societies and cultures of medieval Europe, South Arabia and Tibet, thus providing the fertile humus in which the research of this volume was first conceived and then carried out. The transversal discussions encouraged by VISCOM provided the frame for the comparative research of the group. The medieval biographical collections project was born out of the cross-cultural working group *Enclaves of Learning*, which compared Christian monasteries, Tibetan ›gompa‹ and South Arabian ›hijras‹ as hubs of education and knowledge.[13] Regular meetings and daily exchange among the project

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13   Results of this working group's research are published in Hovden *et al.*, *Meanings of Community,* 271-467.

members revealed that, in separate academic institutions and individually, many of us were confronted with a similar typology of texts, namely collections or narratives building on or made of biographical units. As a matter of fact, biographical collections of scholars, saints and teachers are important sources in Buddhist, Christian and Islamic literatures and thus offered a viable and promising field of comparison. The methodological and hermeneutic approaches to these texts were set within the boundaries provided by another transversal research theme in VISCOM focusing on *Historiography and Identity*.[14] The analysis of the socio-political functions of history-writing as a means to construct and shape identities was applied to medieval biographical collections to explore the contribution of these texts to the construction and the communication of ›visions of community‹.

Despite the obvious differences between biographical collections produced in Christian Europe, Buddhist Tibet and Islamic South Arabia, a productive dialogue was easily started. A new working group specifically dealing with medieval biographical collections saw the light in 2014, in which year the topic, research interests and methodology behind this volume were first discussed. Textual criticism immediately revealed itself as the approach that enabled us to describe, explain and ultimately compare our sources, despite their historical heterogeneity. Several group meetings were held to allow each project member to present his or her source and bring out cross-cutting themes. Research interests naturally crystallised around the study of medieval biographical collections as means to establish norms, define identities, enhance social cohesion, and strengthen authority and legitimacy. Instead of focusing on individual life-stories, the working group decided to reflect on the added value of the serial nature of the sources. This resulted in asking such questions as: how did collections shape the texts and enhance the narrative? Were they composed as a response to specific needs? Did they lend themselves to particular purposes?

A methodology privileging an analytical approach combined with the deconstruction of academically characterised concepts and genres into their structuring principles and defining features cleared the way for fruitful comparative research on biographical collections across the Buddhist, Christian and Islamic worlds. In order to set boundaries and common vocabulary in our comparative endeavour, the same questions had to be asked and the same interpretative tools applied to the texts. Consequently, a research questionnaire was created to orient the analysis and further facilitate interdisciplinary discussion. An analytical framework was articulated through the selection of a set of main themes of shared interest: the role of models and traditions; the use of specific literary devices to build a coherent collection out of a plain juxtaposition of lives; the exposure of the purposes behind the writing and the identification of the audience(s) targeted by the texts; the issues of authorship and authoriality; the role of biographical collections as nodes in intertextual networks;[15] the use of techniques of persuasion to build textual authority. The comparative co-authored articles that constitute the first three chapters of this volume condense the results of the research structured through this conceptual framework and offer a comparative reading of the compilation strategies, the writing techniques, the audiences and the *Fortleben* of the texts.

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14 A series of six volumes on *Historiography and Identity* is the result of this collaborative endeavour. For the analysis of history-writing across Eurasia see, in particular, Pohl *et al.* (eds.), *Historiography and Identity IV*.

15 Intertextuality is the phenomenon in which a meaning of a text is discovered or fully understood through its relation to other texts. On the definition and history of the theory of intertextuality, see Gordon, Intertextuality and Comparative Approaches.

The seven case studies were discussed several times in the course of the regular meetings of the working group and on the occasion of an internal VISCOM workshop; the research on both the individual texts and the analysis in a comparative setting have greatly benefited from the feedback provided not only by the members of the working group but also by the entire VISCOM team, and particularly its project leaders.[16] The individual studies were then presented at an international conference held in Vienna in 2017; each paper was read and commented on by two respondents from two distinct fields of studies, which in turn facilitated exchange and discussion among researchers coming from different disciplines and academic traditions.[17]

Structure and Contents of the Volume

This volume consists of three sections: three comparative chapters, seven case-studies and a concluding synthesis. The different sections are very much interconnected: the results of the individual case-studies form the basis for the comparative dialogue in the three preceding chapters, while the case-studies were themselves shaped by the comparative framework governing the overall project.

The first section is a group of three short chapters that comprise an explanation of the points of comparison undertaken in the project and the results derived from this process. The first, compilation strategies, compares arrangements and techniques used by medieval compilers across different regions and religions to mould individual texts into a cohesive whole and imbue biographical collections with unified messages. The second, writing strategies, discusses questions of literary genre, models and traditions in respect to medieval biographical collections, as well as exploring the textual strategies and rhetorical devices used by authors/compilers across the Buddhist, Christian and Islamic worlds to shape and give coherence to their collections. The third, audience and reception, investigates the relationship between the author/compiler and the audience of medieval biographical collections and considers how subsequent alterations to such collections could create new meanings and audiences, both intended and unintended.

The second section of the volume comprises the seven case-studies, which feature individual analyses of the works used for the comparison. Each case-study investigates in more detail how individual works address the above stipulated comparative points concerning medieval biographical collections. They furthermore demonstrate, overall, how the texts are reflections of the members and values of the community featured within them as well as, occasionally, an active agent that points to a more ideal vision of what the community may become.

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16 There are a number of VISCOM project members that also worked on the topic of medieval biographical collections but are not represented in this volume, and we are grateful for their contribution to the discussion within the group: Manu Radhakrishnan discussed with us the little-studied 14th-century Latin legendary known as *Pronuntiamentum de sanctis*; Eirik Hovden analysed the biographies of the Zaydi imams of the 12th-century Muṭarrifiyya sect; Vincent Eltschinger examined Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita* and the medieval Tibetan translation of the *Lives of the 84 Siddhas*. Christina Lutter and Birgit Kellner offered precious feedback as respondents in internal VISCOM meetings. Their input has been fundamental to building the shared theoretical and methodological framework of this research.

17 We would like to thank the discussants who participated in the conference and whose feedback has nourished the preparation of this volume: Max Diesenberger, Vincent Eltschinger, Clemens Gantner, Phyllis Granoff, Daniel König, Konrad Petrovsky, Florian Schwarz, Marta Sernesi and Jo Van Steenbergen.

In the first case-study, Rutger Kramer examines the *Gesta Sanctorum Rotonensium*, written at Redon in Brittany in the 9th century and discusses the community-building message inherent to the author's retelling of the exploits of the monastery's first generation of monks. In the second case-study, Reinier Langelaar investigates how the biographies in a likely 14th-century genealogical work, associated with a contemporary ruling house in central highland Tibet, situate and naturalise this group's position at the top of the socio-political hierarchy of the wider population in the region. For the third case-study, Graeme Ward and Veronika Wieser explore the continuations of Jerome's *De viris illustribus* written by Gennadius of Marseilles and Frechulf of Lisieux in the 5th and 9th centuries, respectively, and highlight how each compiler reinterpreted Jerome's bio-biographical catalogue to respond to contemporary contexts and to create new communities across time and space. In the fourth case-study, Johann Heiss focusses on two works from late medieval Yemen and compares how the two different biographers shaped the life stories of some of the same individuals to suit the overriding agendas and foci of their collections. In the fifth case-study, Diarmuid Ó Riain examines a collection of Salzburg hagiographical and historiographical texts apparently compiled at Benedictine Admont in the 12th century and discusses how the work shines light on the special relationship between the Salzburg archepiscopal see and the Styrian monastery. For the sixth case-study, Daniel Mahoney investigates how a collection of obituaries from an early 15th-century state chronicle from Yemen provides a more expansive, yet over time increasingly personalised, vision of the political landscape comprising and surrounding the court of the sultan. In the final case study, Giorgia Vocino looks at how an anonymous cleric skilfully arranged the lives of Milanese bishops to create a glorious history of the episcopal city that boosted the authority and prestige of an institution and nourished the sense of identity of the communities gravitating around it.

The third section comprises a conclusion, written by Ó Riain, which incorporates the results of the previous chapters into a discussion of the diverse purposes and aims of the compilers behind medieval biographical collections, the potential for such works to carry particular messages, propagandistic or otherwise, and the relationship between biographical collections and processes of identity- and community-formation.

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